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ABSTRACT

Virtually all British secondary (high) schools and many primary (elementary) schools feature what is called a senior management team (SMT), typically consisting of the headteacher (principal), one or more deputy heads (vice principals), and other teachers. To explore how SMTs are working, a survey questionnaire was mailed to 150 headteachers in randomly selected primary schools with 300 of more pupils. Case studies of SMTs in four schools supplemented the survey data. Three aspects of the conceptual framework are outlined: a dual cultural and political perspective for analyzing interaction through which team approaches are expressed; the idea of an uneasy coexistence between two sets of incompatible beliefs and values underpinning the operation of SMTs; and stipulative definitions of teams against which to assess the approaches investigated. Selected findings are reported to illustrate the diversity and problematic nature of SMTs in primary schools. Most of the headteachers claimed to have adopted a team approach. Only headteachers have the authority to create teams, but they are not all-powerful in promoting the culture of teamwork. Although the findings show that teamwork is worth trying, the risks involved suggest that new headteachers should consider adopting a "low gain, low strain" approach initially. (RJM)

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Synergy through Teamwork: Sharing Primary School Leadership

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Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, San Diego, California April 13th-17th, 1998

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Introduction

Teamwork as a High Risk Enterprise

Sharing leadership of schools through some form of teamwork is a bit like motherhood and apple pie - widely regarded in educational circles as a good thing. Part of the restructuring agenda for North American schools revolves around fostering greater participation by staff (faculty) in decisions about developing the institution that affect their working lives.

Virtually all British secondary (high) schools and an increasing proportion of primary (elementary) schools feature what is called a 'senior management team' (SMT), typically consisting of the headteacher (principal), one or more deputy heads (vice principals) and other teachers with the most substantial management responsibility and the highest salary. Team members therefore represent a subgroup of the professional staff, and they are involved in some way in what would be regarded in North America as both leadership and management tasks: making a stream of major policy and routine adminstrative decisions on behalf of of other staff, whose views are represented to a varying degree. (The distinction often drawn in North America between 'leadership' and 'management' is more blurred in British usage, the latter term often being expanded to cover both development and maintenance tasks. Incorporation of the term 'management' in the label 'senior management team' refers both to leadership and to management activity.)

The orthodoxy for headteachers has become to surround themselves with a team - a team in name, but does it necessarily mean team in deed? The purposes of this paper are threefold: to report key findings of research into British primary school SMTs which raises questions about how far such teams really engage in teamwork; to explain why team approaches are often problematic; and to speculate briefly on how effective teamwork may be fostered.

Research on secondary school SMTs, which have been established for about two decades, suggests that the rhetoric of power sharing, extensive delegation, collaboration and participative management that so often accompanies claims of having adopted a team approach is not necessarily matched by their practice (Weindling and Earley 1987; Torrington and Weightman 1989; Wallace and Hall 1994). This work has shown that SMT operation is diverse: the headteacher may simply direct other SMT members, each of whom has an individual area of management responsibility; or work around colleagues who are uncommitted to teamwork; or engage in full collaboration with other members. Commitment to shared management among headteachers and other team members turns out to be highly variable.

Given this quite widespread rhetoric-reality divide, is the assumption justified that team approaches to leadership are necessarily better than traditional 'go it alone' strategies where headteachers acted as the sole manager of their organisation (Hall et al 1986; Southworth 1995)? The principle of sharing leadership has been justified as intrinsically valuable on moral grounds (Bottery 1992; Southworth 1995; Blase and Anderson 1995), constituting a rightful way to operate in a democratic country which maximises each individual's rights. The experience of taking part in shared leadership can also be a fulfilling professional experience (Wallace and Hall 1994). But SMTs in schools do not exist just for the benefit of their members, and the bottom line question must be: how effective are team approaches in fulfilling their role in leading and managing schools? The early research evidence on secondary schools suggested that SMTs can be a mixed blessing (Weindling and Earley 1987; Torrington and Weightman 1989; Secondary Heads Association 1992), with enduring difficulties reportedly experienced in up to a third of teams.

The first observational study of secondary school SMTs (Wallace and Hall 1994), which informed the present research, concluded that team approaches represent a 'high gain, high strain' strategy for school leadership and management. They are difficult to bring off, and headteachers risk disempowerment if enduring internal conflict arises or if some members do not pull their weight. Where synergy between SMT members is achieved, however, they can work very effectively. All members are empowered because the pooling of ideas, expertise, and information tends to lead to more thoroughly thought through team decisions, informed by a more comprehensive overview, and to more extensive two way communication with other staff, than heads could achieve on their own. So the team prize may be worth having, but it may also be hard to win. Are the potential consequences of a failed team approach, therefore, worth the risk of trying?

Teamwork in a High Risk Environment

The level of risk has been dramatically raised by national reforms in the UK. These reforms led to a multiplicity of externally imposed innovations (Wallace 1991) throughout the early 1990s, resulting in an explosion of new leadership tasks to implement these changes together with additional enduring management tasks embodied in reforms like staff appraisal. Go it alone leadership was no longer a viable option for headteachers. They became more dependent on their colleagues to orchestrate the implementation of innovations connected with particular reforms; to contribute their unique expertise to the leadership process as they gained experience with the new practices; and to assist with monitoring implementation throughout the institution.

With the imposition of further reforms designed to strengthen external accountability, like national assessment of pupil learning and regular external inspection of schools (both of which included publication of results), headteachers have also become more vulnerable. They alone among the professional staff are charged with legal responsibility for managing the school within the oversight of the governing body (approximating to school boards in the USA, but where each school has its own board). The accountability measures have ensured that headteachers are exposed and publicly villified if evidence is revealed of failure to implement central government imposed innovations, or to reach externally determined standards of student learning. An impression of the impact of reforms on the increase in external accountability of primary school headteachers and their dependence on the other staff may be gained from the list of reforms and their impact summarised in Table 1.

(INSERT TABLE 1)

These reforms have sharpened a longstanding dilemma for heads: their greater dependence on professional colleagues draws them towards sharing the leadership and management burden through some kind of team approach. In a climate of increased external accountability, however, they may be inhibited from sharing in ways that might backfire if colleagues turn out to be empowered to act in ways that produce low standards of pupil achievement, alienate parents and governors, bring negative media attention, or incur negative judgements by inspectors. In short, how much sharing dare headteachers risk?

The remainder of the paper is divided into three sections. First, details of the research design are given and three aspects of the conceptual framework for the study are outlined: a dual cultural and political perspective for analysing interaction through which team approaches are expressed; the idea of an uneasy coexistence between two sets of incompatible beliefs and values underpinning the operation of SMTs; and stipulative definitions of teams against which to assess the approaches investigated.

Second, selected findings are reported to illustrate the diversity and problematic nature of SMTs in primary schools. The degree to which the survey suggests that team approaches have spread is outlined, then the underpinning of team structure and practice by a varied balance between belief in a management hierarchy and in equal contribution of team members is discussed with reference to the case studies. Topics cover the structural

location of SMTs within a hierarchical management structure; variable practices within a common team role with its shared tasks; and commitment to teamwork in terms of coordination activity.

Third, in conclusion, how far the case study SMTs should be counted as team approaches is examined; an elaborate explanatory hypothsesis is put forward about interaction between heads and other SMT members based on the varied expression of belief in a management hierarchy and in equal contribution of team members; and practical implications of this hypothesis for developing team approaches to school leadership are considered.

Investigating Primary School SMTs

Research Design

Fieldwork for the research was undertaken in the mid 1990s when the new accountability measures were beginning to bite in primary schools. SMTs in this sector are a much more recent phenomenon than their secondary counterparts. Early evidence (eg Wallace and McMahon 1994) suggested that they had emerged largely since the reform period began in the late 1980s, and the present study confirmed that they represent, in part, headteachers' response to reforms. The research was designed to explore how, in this reform context, SMTs in large primary schools operate where senior staff claim commitment to teamwork as their core strategy for managing the school.

The decision was taken to concentrate on large primary schools because it was likely that the number of teachers in institutions of this size would preclude the entire staff being conceived as the management team. The research focus lay on the notion of a *senior* management team where, as in secondary schools (which are generally larger than primary schools), members of any SMT would be a small subset of the whole staff. The research was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council from May 1995 to November 1996, and had three main objectives:

- to determine how widespread senior management teams have become in large primary schools;
- to examine how these teams are developed and sustained through interaction inside each team and between team members and other groups;
- to identify internal and external factors impacting on teamwork practice.

Methods of investigation were of two kinds. First, a postal questionnaire survey of 150 headteachers in randomly selected schools with 300 or more pupils was conducted to establish the prevalence of senior management teams, their structures and key practices, yielding 65 returns. Follow up telephone calls to 79 non-respondents established that the proportion of respondents' schools with some form of SMT approximated that in the wider sample (Wallace and Huckman 1996). Second, qualitative methods were employed to conduct focused, interpretive case studies (Merriam 1988) of four SMTs over the 1995/96 academic year. Case study schools were labelled as Winton, Pinehill, Kingsrise and Waverley. The research design was informed by techniques for data analysis developed by Miles and Huberman (1994). Case study data sources consisted of 58 semi-structured interviews (eight with headteachers, 20 with other members of the senior management teams, 26 with a sample of other staff, and four with school governors); observation of twelve senior management team meetings and ten other meetings where team members were present; plus a document archive.

Research questions were derived from a literature review and the conceptual framework and findings of the secondary schools SMT study, to which the survey and interview questions

related. Survey data were tabulated, responses to open-ended questions being categorised inductively. Fieldnotes were taken during case study observations and interviews, and the latter were tape recorded. Summary tapes were prepared by referring to fieldnotes, schedules and documents, which were then transcribed. Interview summaries were made, feeding into site summaries which formed the basis for cross-site analysis. Matrices were developed to display qualitative data, and the data set was also scanned to explore the contextual complexity of particular interactions.

A Cultural and Political Perspective

The theoretical orientation of the research was based on literature about micropolitics and staff professional cultures. A combined cultural and political perspective developed in the secondary school SMT study (Wallace and Hall 1994) formed the conceptual framework for this investigation. It focuses on the question: who has power to shape the organisational culture? The term culture is defined simply as 'the way we do things around here' (Bower 1966): the beliefs and values about education, management and relationships that are common to some or all of the staff in a school. A 'culture of teamwork' may develop among SMT members, consisting of shared beliefs, values and associated norms or rules of behaviour about working together to manage the school.

Power, following Giddens (1984), implies making things happen: the use of resources to achieve desired ends, whether synergistically as staff work together in the same direction, or antagonistically as they pursue conflicting goals. It may be divided into authority - the use of resources legitimated by beliefs and values about status, including the right to apply sanctions; and influence - the informal use of resources without recourse to sanctions linked to authority (although other sanctions like withdrawing commitment to teamwork may be available). Headteachers' conditions of service give them exclusive authority over the rest of the staff for school management, but teachers may wield influence in seeking to support or undermine the head. In other words, everyone has some power. Even for heads, controlling other staff is more a matter of delimiting their actions - allowing for a range of behaviour within certain parameters - than attempting to establish direct control over them.

Management Hierarchy Versus Equal Contribution

The earlier study of secondary school SMTs showed how their culture of teamwork was characterised by a chronic contradiction between two sets of incompatible beliefs and values, affecting members' use of resources to achieve goals within a team approach. SMT members believed in a *management hierarchy* with the head at its apex, while at the same time believing in the ability of all team members to make an *equal contribution* to team decisions, whatever their status in this hierarchy.

The movement towards sharing primary school leadership and management through teamwork overlays a long tradition where headteachers were the single member of the professional staff with formal management responsibility (Coulson 1980). An expanding range of intermediate posts has emerged in recent decades, carrying varying levels of enhanced salary linked with differential management responsibilities. Belief in a management hierarchy is consistent with these graded posts, where senior staff are entitled to oversee the work of the junior colleagues for whom they are responsible. Headteachers top the hierarchy since they are externally accountable for the school and have unique ability to affect colleagues' careers through their contribution to staff selection, appraisal and development, allocation of responsibilities, and associated salaries.

Sharing through a team approach also resonates with the growth of egalitarian beliefs and values about primary school management which have become commonplace, fostered during the 1980s by publications of central government groups and national and local committees of enquiry (Wallace 1989). Many academics and trainers have advocated a collaborative approach to management, both on the moral grounds mentioned earlier and on grounds of effectiveness. One argument is that managers are interdependent, whatever their

position in the management hierarchy, so every member of staff has a contribution to make since managerial tasks can only be fulfilled with and through other people. Gaining staff commitment to policy decisions is therefore necessary (Bell and Rhodes 1996). As with headteachers, less senior managers also depend for their success on the performance of those they manage. Inside the SMT, each member has an equal say in team decisions. While heads are creators, developers and leaders of their SMTs, they are also team members whose opinion may be worth no more and no less than that of colleagues. The present study of primary school SMTs was designed to explore whether, like secondary school SMTs, their operation was affected by a culture of teamwork which included a variable balance between beliefs, values and norms linked with a management hierarchy and those connected with making an equal contribution as SMT members to the work of the whole team.

When is a Team not a Team?

Given the evidence of varied practice in secondary SMTs, it is important to have some benchmark against which to consider how far the primary school SMTs were teams in more than name. There has to be a limit as to what may count if teams are to be distinguishable from groups or other loose associations of individuals. Teams must be conceived as an entity over and above the aggregate of individuals who constitute their members, so SMTs must consist of more than the individual management responsibility of each member. The broad definition of a *team* offered by Larson and LaFasto (1989, p. 19) makes a suitable starting point:

> A team has two or more people; it has a specific performance objective or recognisable goal to be attained; and coordination of activity among the members of the team is required for the attainment of the team goal or objective.

The complementary definition by Katzenbach and Smith (1993, p. 45) is more exacting:

> A team is a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves accountable.

Implicitly, part of what makes an effective team a distinctive entity is the synergy arising from complementarity of its members' contributions, entailing shared commitment extending beyond goals and their achievement to acceptance of mutual responsibility for the team's performance. It is notable that neither of these definitions addresses whether the contribution of each team member to shared team goals should be equal.

SMTs: What's the Problem?

A New Orthodoxy

The survey returns suggested that what headteachers conceive as an SMT has become the norm in larger primary sector schools, since over nine out of ten respondents reported that their school had one. Five out of six SMTs had been established since 1988, most headteachers indicating that they had created their team. Headteachers appear to have been ready to use their unique level of authority as top manager to make the unilateral decision whether to opt for a team approach. A minority referred directly to reforms as a stimulus for creating an SMT, suggesting that the massive increase in management tasks connected with them was, indeed, one factor behind the establishment of SMTs in primary schools.

While the rationale behind headteachers' creation of an SMT implied sharing leadership, its nature and scope differed, as these contrasting accounts illustrate:

To move responsibility away from the centre; to share decision taking; to improve the communication network; to more accurately reflect school needs in devising the development plan; to spread knowledge of management issues and develop staff for promotion.

A think tank; a sounding board for the head; a channel of communication to and from year teams; and a coordinating and overall planning body.

The one suggests a relatively egalitarian approach fostering wide participation which embraces making key decisions; the other suggests a more hierarchical, 'headocentric' approach, directed towards the interest of the headteacher in extending his or her knowledge of and impact on the work of other staff.

There was a built in hierarchy in all the teams through the distribution of individual management responsibilities among their members. Each SMT represented a small group within the staff of between three to nine members and included staff with the highest levels of formal status, salary level and span of management responsibility in the school. All teams included the headteacher and deputy or deputies; most also included one or more of the most senior teachers. Membership of the case study schools numbered four at Winton, six at Pinehill, seven at Kingsrise and five at Warmley. Table 2 summarises how the individual management responsibility of their members gave them oversight of the other staff through a combination of cross-school responsibilities like appraisal and in-service training, and responsibility for a department consisting of a group of classes within a particular age range. It also indicates how the most extensive cross-school responsibilities tended to rest with the highest staff status levels in each team, the four heads each retaining responsibility for the devolved budget under the 'local management of schools' (LMS) initiative - a major central government reform.

(INSERT TABLE 2)

The hierarchical span of responsibilities for other staff does not, in itself, indicate much about how SMT members might operate as a team. In principle, as long as the management structure covers the work of all staff, members could atomistically fulfil their individual management responsibility under the supervision of the headteacher as their 'line manager', with little sense of the whole team adding up to more than the individual work of its members. A core additional dimension, implicit in the rationales for creating teams highlighted above and consistent with the definition of a team offered by Larson and LaFasto, was the degree to which team members attempted to coordinate their work to ensure that they were working towards common goals. Coordination, in turn, related to the role of the SMT in managing the school.

SMT Role and Tasks

At the level of generality, there was little disparity in the conceptions of the SMT role and broad shared tasks articulated by headteachers and other team members in the case study schools. In essence, the shared team role was to *make a strategic contribution to leadership and management of the school as a whole, within the 'hands-on' leadership of the head, and with more 'arm's length' support from the governing body*. The head at one case study school portrayed graphically how the SMT played a pivotal role in orchestrating the way the school was managed and its pupils were taught, bringing coherence and unification to the work of staff throughout a complex institution. The SMT was responsible for:

Organisation, day to day, week to week, year to year...the sheer getting the whole thing to hang together smoothly. The school is such an enormous machine, not just because of the numbers but because of the layout, and it is like trying to drive the thing along together without having all the wheels trying to go in different directions at the same time as bumping along. Sometimes we only manage it by the skin of our teeth. Sometimes we have days when we just don't. It's about trying to keep us all

> going in the same direction, right from the obvious things like when the school photographer comes for it all to go smoothly, to the delivery of the mathematics curriculum. Or the integration of the nursery and reception [pupils aged three and four] so that it then informs development in key stage one [pupils aged four to seven] and key stage two [pupils aged seven to eleven]. The sheer massive task of organisation so that it all looks like a nice, smooth whole.

Each component of a model of the SMT role developed from the survey responses (and depicted in Figure 1) featured in some way in the four case study SMTs:

- the internal *teamwork process* entailed contributing to an overview of the school and its external environment and to a flow of ideas and opinions informed by this overview, and the experience of working together had potential to offer individuals a professional learning experience;

- core *team tasks* embraced some degree of shared involvement in policy making, planning, ensuring smooth day to day running and making a stream of related decisions, within the parameters of certain aims or a vision, however far they were articulated and shared;

- *linkage subtasks* associated in part with individual management responsibilities facilitated a flow of information and opinion between the SMT and other teaching and support staff, governors and parents. Linkage might be proactive (as where SMT members disseminated information, monitored the implementation of major policy decisions and consulted other staff on proposed decisions), or reactive (as where other staff were encouraged to voice their concerns and to participate in the policy decision making process itself).

(INSERT FIGURE 1)

At a finer level of detail significant contrasts were apparent. When the perceptions and practices were unpacked which lay beneath a broadly similar role and the same categories of teamwork process, team task, linkage subtask, very different team approaches were revealed. There was diversity in each component of the model, consistent with a different balance between expression of belief in a management hierarchy and in equal contribution of team members. Headteachers were the gatekeepers, having authority to decide what aspects of leadership and management could be shared or not, how extensively sharing could take place inside and beyond the team, and how equal any sharing could be. The head at Kingsrise indicated that the reason she did not open the gate of sharing very far was because of her interest in retaining tight control over other SMT members' contribution:

> One of the hardest things in my view is for a primary head to let go and to delegate. We are used to having everything under our control and it is very, very hard to delegate it down and think, 'Are they going to do it the way I want it?' And if they don't get it the way I want it personally, then I know I will have to let them run with it. And if it's effective I must accept it, but if it's not effective, I know that I will have to step in and say, Now look, we have given you your head but do you think this is working?'

If other members did not share the heads' beliefs and values about sharing, they had recourse to influence, primarily through withdrawing their commitment to the version of teamwork promoted by heads. Such a situation occurred at Pinehill, where the head had recently been appointed. The previous headteacher and deputy had both been off school for long periods through illness and other members of the SMT had enjoyed the opportunity to make a much more equal contribution in their absence. The new headteacher had immediately attempted to impose his authority on a group where several members were unwilling at first to accept the more subordinate contribution he wanted. Department leaders used influence by reportedly offering minimal compliance to the headteacher while

complaining about the head to other staff behind his back, so engendering a perception among the latter of a disunited team.

The major contrast between the teams lay in the emphasis on extensive sharing throughout the SMT on a relatively equal basis at Winton, which was as strong as the opposing emphasis on unequal sharing of a narrower range of tasks, differentiated according to an internal hierarchy in the other three SMTs. Here members other than the headteacher had more limited scope to contribute, members with least formal status being less fully involved than more senior among members, especially the deputy.

First, the content, extent and boundaries of team tasks and linkage subtasks varied: at Winton, the headteacher encouraged all other SMT members to participate fully in a great diversity of tasks, from days spent together out of school working up major policy proposals to ongoing participation in maintaining pupil discipline across the school. Personal and performance matters affecting individual SMT members was one of the few areas of management that the headteacher dealt with individually. Sharing was not entirely equal across the team, however. The special needs coordinator (responsible for supporting pupils with particular learning or emotional difficulties) was also responsible for a class, so was less readily available than her colleague SMT members to contribute to team tasks during the school day.

At Pinehill, team tasks excluded curriculum matters (which were addressed by a parallel group consisting of the head and deputy and a teacher designated as curriculum leader. She was invited to become member of the SMT during the fieldwork period to forge a link between the curriculum management group and the SMT). Monitoring implementation of decisions extending to classroom observation was being developed through training for the headteacher and deputies at Winton, whereas at the other schools, headteachers had accepted that this intensive and potentially threatening level of internal monitoring was a task for them alone.

These headteachers were not sole determinants of the limits of SMT practice: there was reticence among their SMT colleagues to monitor the performance of other staff. To do so ran counter to the wider staff professional culture which accorded individuals a high degree of classroom autonomy. These SMT members had used influence to voice their unease and so realise their interest in avoiding an unwelcome management task. The notion of a management hierarchy suited them here, in that they could argue it was not their job as junior managers to do the monitoring.

Second, members of the teams other than heads could make a more or less equal contribution to those tasks which were shared. While the head at Winton encouraged SMT colleagues to take strategic initiatives inside boundaries with which she felt comfortable (such as piloting a new system for improving pupil discipline), the other heads primarily consulted other members about matters relating to their own agenda. One SMT member at Waverley commented how the headteacher often used other members to:

> bounce ideas off the rest of us, discuss ideas with us before going to staff meetings, raise general issues and so on. So, as far as him actually allocating tasks to us, that's been fairly minimal up to now. He's really discussed things with us, asked our opinions on things, we've fed back to him, he's taken that into account, and then he's made decisions or not made decisions.

Where all members participated in making team decisions, the norm that a working consensus must be achieved was characteristic of the four SMTs. The debate leading to a decision at Winton, however, commonly took the form of 'open consultation' where each member offered ideas. The other heads tended to opt for 'bounded consultation', where they put forward their proposed decision and sought other members' comments on it before taking it to a meeting with other staff, and the head at Waverley retained exclusive authority to make many decisions himself.

Third, individual inputs to the teamwork process were variably hierarchical. Though pooling of information to build an overview was a feature of the four teams, the flow of information and opinion was multidirectional at Winton but channelled more unidirectionally in the other SMTs towards what the head wanted to know to extend her or his personal overview. The headteacher at Winton noted how she had a unique overview of areas like finance and work across the two departments catering for the younger and older pupils but her colleague team members reported how she informed them about these areas and also about the external environment through her more extensive contacts with outside agencies. At Kingsrise, the headteacher was perceived by her deputy to be unique among team members in having an overview of the school and its staff:

> The headteacher has a good oversight of the school and of the personnel here as well. She knows them all really well and spots things pretty quickly before other members of staff even see it or are aware of it.

Fourth, individuals brought to the team different combinations of specialist knowledge and skills. The precise mix of expertise in any team was linked with the spread of individual management responsibilities, as Table 2 highlighted, but also with team members' varied previous experience elsewhere and their present contact with staff from other local schools.

Fifth, it varied how far this range of attributes was regarded as complementary. Team members at Winton were aware of the complementarity, not only of their individual expertise connected with their individual management responsibility, but also of their different skills linked to their personalities entailed in balancing creative thinking with getting tasks completed. In the words of one deputy:

> Teams need different skills, and on my own I haven't got them all...[the head] is a very good innovator, brings new ideas, wants to set the ball rolling with new things; I would be the main 'keep it plodding along' person; [the other deputy] is a completer, she has got a tick list...a systematic way of doing things.

Awareness of complementarity among SMT members in the other teams was apparently restricted largely to their knowledge of a particular area connected with the hierarchical distribution of individual management responsibilities, suggesting that their contribution to the team did not reach so far beyond their own responsibility. Observation of SMT meetings in the four teams supported this finding: SMT members at Winton had greater scope for initiating debate and for contributing ideas on the broad range of issues addressed.

A Balancing Act

Why did the case study school heads opt for such different team approaches? The evidence suggested that they were not simply 'control freaks', attempting solely to realise an interest in directive control. Rather, they fostered the kind of support from colleague members that they valued while also delimiting the boundaries of this contribution more or less tightly, so that it would remain within their 'comfort zone' in a high risk environment. (Three of the four case study schools were inspected during or shortly after the fieldwork period.) The headteachers each acknowledged their need for support in the aftermath of the reforms, especially that provided by others' complementary ideas, expertise and detailed knowledge which could complement their own. Yet they varied markedly in the degree to which they were ready to take the risk of losing control through empowering colleagues by sharing and delegating tasks.

Differences between the teams cannot be explained simply as reflecting either egalitarian or hierarchical beliefs and values alone - both were expressed, but in varying proportions. The approach to the role and tasks of Winton's SMT appeared to be strongly egalitarian, but hierarchy was still present in the differential levels of status and individual management

responsibilities, and in the inability of the special needs coordinator to make as full a contribution as other members.

Observation of Winton SMT meetings indicated that members other than the head helped ensure that their contribution did stay mostly well within the head's comfort zone by expressing their belief in the management hierarchy, so empowering the headteacher. They would voluntarily check that she was willing to go along with a course of action they were advocating. When discussing her initiative to pilot the scheme for improving pupil behaviour, one deputy asked the head if it would be OK to go ahead 'without you knowing the detail at this stage'. Where there was disagreement over a team decision, the head noted that:

> There's often a casting vote type of situation, and they will accept that and acknowledge that there are some times when we are not all going to agree and we will have gone backwards and forwards but n the final analysis I will just have to say, 'This is the way it is.' I think it works quite well because we know we would never move forward on a lot of issues if we didn't have that unspoken arrangement.

The culture of teamwork shared throughout the team included the (unspoken) norm that the headteacher had a duty as top manager to pull rank so as to ensure progress, but only where equal contribution did not result in consensus. Speculatively, the flexibility with which all team members were able to switch between the two contradictory beliefs according to circumstances was a secret of synergistic success for this SMT. It reduced the risk for the headteacher losing control while being held uniquely accountable for the work of the team that extensive, relatively equal sharing can bring: this was a 'high gain, low strain' team approach, dependent on the sophistication of a culture of teamwork in which contradictory beliefs and values could coexist without conflict.

Overall, the pattern of interaction between team members appeared to occupy a position towards the end of the continuum between belief in a management hierarchy and belief in equal contribution which was weighted towards equal contribution, as depicted impressionistically in Figure 2. The other three teams were as strongly hierarchical, occupying a position towards the opposite end of the continuum with belief in a management hierarchy in the ascendent.

(INSERT FIGURE 2)

Making Time for Teamwork

The varied balance between an emphasis on the management hierarchy and on equal contribution of team members was reflected in the structure and frequency of meetings of the whole SMT and of subgroups within them. These meetings constituted the major forum for interaction and coordination among team members in fulfilling the team tasks of policy making and strategic planning. The pattern of SMT meetings was revealing, as summarised in Table 3. Winton had the most differentiated arrangement with three kinds of meeting that reflected the extent of shared team tasks. The purpose of the daily and weekly meetings was mainly restricted to short term planning and routine organisation, but they were complemented by the much longer meetings where more strategic and long term issues were explored in great detail. The depth of commitment to a team approach to management was indicated by the way members not only met every day before lessons began but also spent around five hours per week in meeting together, occasionally eating into their time at half terms and weekends. The findings of the survey imply that such extensive commitment of time was exceptional: most SMTs met, outside lesson times, for a median time of around one hour per week. Commitment of time to team meetings varied from five hours to the equivalent of just five minutes per week (where one SMT met for half an hour six times a year)!

(INSERT TABLE 3)

The time commitment in the other case study teams was considerably lower than at Winton, suggesting that the narrower and less equal contribution the heads were seeking from their SMT colleagues required less time together. The two hour weekly meeting at Pinehill, though under half the time occupied by Winton team meetings, was still greater than the majority of SMTs in the survey. It provided a less frequent opportunity for whole team updating than the Winton team's daily sessions, and the team tasks were less extensive, as this was the one case study SMT whose remit did not include curriculum issues. Nevertheless, members had a quite frequent and substantial period of time to devote to team tasks, and were able to meet during the school day, in contrast to most survey SMTs. The team at Kingsrise spent least time in SMT meetings, around half an hour per week overall, in line with only a small minority of SMTs in the survey. Members came together once a fortnight, the opportunity for extended discussion of longer term issues being restricted to the monthly after school meeting which alternated with the monthly meeting before school. The team at Waverley, committed to an after school meeting of an hour or so each week, was more typical of the survey SMTs. Here the one type of meeting covered day to day and longer term issues.

Commitment to a team approach, insofar as it is indicated by commitment to team meetings, was clearly greater at Winton, where more tasks were shared - and more equally among all team members - than in the other three case study schools. Yet members in all four teams were making some structured effort to coordinate their contributions to the role of the SMT. Time spent in meeting together is, of course, a very crude indicator of commitment to a team approach. It makes no allowance for how effectively this time is used, nor for other forms of joint work. On the other hand, this analysis does square with differences in approaches to team tasks discussed earlier.

The pattern of meetings of subgroups within the case study SMTs was just as indicative. An element of hierarchy was present in all four cases, where heads and deputies - the team members with highest formal status and the least class teaching (instruction) duties - met on an *ad hoc* basis to deal with day to day issues, often during lesson times when other members were teaching. These informal meetings happened more frequently in the three SMTs marked by a strong element of internal hierarchy than at Winton and, at Pinehill, were supplemented by a regular formal meeting between the head and deputy. They appeared to represent a more central part of the team approach in the three more strongly hierarchical SMTs.

Conclusions

Teams and Sharing

The evidence implies that headteachers, and their beliefs and values about teamwork, were crucial to the team approach adopted since only they had authority to create a team, select its members, and promote a particular culture of teamwork. Reforms were reflected in the way they had allocated members' individual management responsibilities and the content of team tasks such as introducing staff appraisal. Headteachers were not all-powerful in promoting the culture of teamwork, as illustrated in the case of Pinehill. Here some members rejected the head's hierarchical approach and used informal sources of power to undermine his efforts.

Most headteachers responding to the survey claimed to have adopted a team approach, and the case studies complemented the survey in providing evidence from sources other than heads about SMT practice. All four met the criteria embedded in the two stipulative definitions cited earlier, though to a varying degree. They were small, self-identified groups, whose members articulated, in very general terms, a common purpose in contributing to leadership and management. This purpose had a narrower focus on

supporting the headteacher with his or her agenda in the three more hierarchical SMTs. Shared tasks were not broken down in any team into specific performance goals. Team members varied in their efforts to monitor their effectiveness as a team, those at Winton being most self critical but still basing their judgements on impressionistic evidence such as whether disquiet was expressed by other staff or whether team members were aware of working to implement team decisions.

Some coordination efforts were made in the four teams, but striking variation in the scope of team meetings and the internal hierarchy reflected in meetings among subgroups in three teams suggests that the headteacher's commitment to sharing leadership and management through a team approach was greater at Winton than elsewhere. Complementarity in terms of sharing expert knowledge linked with individual management responsibilities in such meetings was a feature of all the teams, but awareness of complementary skills was also greatest at Winton. Indirect evidence of team members sharing a sense of accountability for the SMT's work was offered by the degree to which members presented a united front to other staff and governors, even where there may have been internal disagreement. The complaints of department leaders at Pinehill to other staff about the headteacher could be interpreted as implying that they did not identify with his version of a team and therefore did not feel accountable for its work.

The survey and case study evidence underlines distinguishing characteristics of the case study SMTs on which the definitions of teams were silent. They concerned the team leaders' approach to linked aspects of sharing the work of the team for which others' coordinated contributions were needed: *what* they were prepared to share; *with whom* in the team they were prepared to share it; and *how equally* they were prepared to share it with some or all other team members. The headteacher at Winton shared most of the leadership and management burden, she attempted to share it with all her SMT colleagues, and she did so relatively equally. The other headteachers shared less of this burden overall, shared less of it with more junior than with more senior colleague members, and shared it unequally with all of them.

Management Hierarchy and Equal Contribution Revisited

The extent of sharing matters because it has implications for the potential contribution of other team members, the degree of synergy attainable, and also the level of risk of things going wrong from the perspective of the headteachers as team leader. Figure 3 provides the framework for a speculative explanation of the varied patterns of interaction in the case study SMTs. The matrix compares norms relating to belief in a management hierarchy and in equal contribution to which the headteacher subscribes (the left and right hand columns) with the equivalent norms to which other SMT members subscribe (the upper and lower rows). Each cell depicts the combination of norms held by the headteacher and other SMT members. (For simplicity, it has been assumed here that other SMT members share allegiance to the same norm at any time.)

(INSERT FIGURE 3)

The upper left hand cell represents the situation at Kingsrise and Waverley, where the headteacher adopted a strongly hierarchical team approach which was accepted by other SMT members. This was a 'low gain, low strain' approach where interaction was harmonious since there was congruence between norms followed by all members. The headteacher took a low risk of loss of control by restricting the potential contribution of other members, but the potential for SMT-wide synergy was also low. The range of shared tasks was limited and other members were not encouraged to take initiatives and to contribute their own ideas over and above those entailed in responding to the headteacher's proposals.

The lower right hand cell represents the situation at Winton, where the headteacher encouraged other members to make an equal contribution and they were willing to do so.

Here the potential for SMT synergy was high because all members were involved in a wide range of tasks and were encouraged to contribute all of which they were capable, including taking their own initiatives. The risk of the headteacher losing control was low as long as other members sought outcomes within the headteacher's comfort zone and were willing to compromise if necessary to achieve this situation. It is important to note interaction is harmonious in both cells where there is congruence between the norms followed by all members, but that the level of synergy may be much higher where all involved can make an equal contribution (on the assumption that headteachers do not have a monopoly on the best ideas for leading and managing a school in the complex post-reform UK environment).

A team may sustain harmonious interaction and reap as much synergy as is possible at any time through all members working towards making an equal contribution. If the contingency arises where one or more other members advocate a course of action lying outside the headteacher's comfort zone, and they can accept the headteacher pulling rank, withdrawing a decision from the domain of the team, and making it unilaterally as the team leader who is externally accountable for the work of the SMT, then harmonious interaction may be retained. The key to smooth operation and maximising synergy is for both headteacher and other SMT members to be flexible enough to switch together temporarily, for occasional contingencies like this, from adherence to the norm of equal contribution to the norm of a management hierarchy.

The remaining two cells indicate alternative ways in which synergy may be lost where there is a disjunction between the norms followed by the headteacher and other SMT members. The bottom left hand cell covers situations where the head operates hierarchically by pulling rank according to their position in the management hierarchy but other members do not accept this move because it transgresses their belief in their entitlement to make an equal contribution. Open conflict may ensue for a time, as at Pinehill. The top right hand cell covers situations where the headteacher encourages colleague members to make an equal contribution, but they act according to their subordinate position in the management hierarchy. The result is disengagement of other members, as they hold back from making the sort of contribution fostered by the headteacher. Such a situation arose in two of the three more hierarchical case study SMTs where the headteacher encouraged other SMT members to participate in monitoring other staff through visiting classes at work but they declined the invitation, implying that it was the headteacher's task as top manager.

Get Real: Working Towards Team Effectiveness

The matrix helps to explain some of the major findings presented earlier, though further research would be needed to test and refine it. The practical implications of this elaborate hypothesis for improving leadership and management in schools seem clear. First, training and consultancy support for headteachers and other SMT members might usefully be directed towards raising awareness of their contradictory managerial beliefs and values. Second, assistance could be offered with learning to live with this contradiction and to switch between alternative beliefs and values as and when contingencies arise. Third, rather than advocating simplistic solutions (usually, in the past in Britain, pushing towards extensive sharing of leadership and management), headteachers could be advised to adopt a contingency approach, depending on an ongoing situational analysis.

The research suggests that a team approach is worth trying, but the risks involved make it advisable for new headteachers to consider adopting a 'low gain, low strain' approach towards teamwork initially, setting tight boundaries to colleagues' contribution, so offering limited potential for synergy but carrying a low risk of disempowering headteachers if they fail to engender a collaborative culture of teamwork. They could work towards the holy grail of the high gain, low strain approach based on belief in equal contribution, but avoid some of the risk of open conflict or disengagement by proceeding with caution. The low gain, low strain hierarchical approach followed harmoniously in two case study schools is likely to be more effective in a context of stringent external accountability than a headlong

rush towards equal contribution, risking consequences that headteachers cannot afford to accept.

Finally, it is noteworthy that the contingent and nonrational approach to training and teamwork practice suggested here flies in the face of most training in the UK and elsewhere which tends toward the rationalistic, seeking to reduce the complexity of leading and managing schools to a logically consistent, simple formula for action which will achieve surefire success. This research shows that real life is not so simple, and the sooner training catches up with this complexity, the better. It is ironic that yet another UK reform - preparatory training for aspiring headteachers introduced in 1997 - has been cast very much in terms of hierarchy, reversing the equally simplistic earlier orientation of trainers towards promoting equal contribution. The training syllabus focuses closely on the headteacher as directive top manager (Teacher Training Agency 1997). Leading an SMT scarcely makes it onto this new training agenda. Yet team approaches emphasising equal contribution, with a contingent regression to hierarchy, may be where the degree of synergy lies that could really make a difference to the quality of school leadership.

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Table 1 – Cumulative impact of reforms on primary headteachers' accountability and dependence

Change Connected with Reform	Impact on Headteachers	
	External Accountability	Dependence on Other Staff
national curriculum	basis for assessment and external inspection	implementation by class teachers, led by curriculum post holders responsible for writing policies and support
religious education and collective worship	basis for judgement by parents and inspectors of provision and its quality	implementation by class teachers, led by post holder responsible for RE
assessment of national curriculum	basis for judgement by parents, governors and inspectors of standards achieved	implementation by class teachers, especially in Year 2 and Year 6.
external inspection, results published	basis for judgement by parents, governors and wider public of standards achieved and quality of teaching and management	quality of all teachers' work inspected, including policies developed by postholders
league tables of national curriculum assessment results and truancy rates	basis for comparative judgement by parents, governors and inspectors of standards of pupil learning and discipline	all teachers' work contributes directly or indirectly to assessment results and truancy rates
code of practice for pupils with special educational needs (SEN)	basis for judgement by parents, governors and inspectors of quality of provision and its management	class teachers with pupils who have SEN and SEN co-ordinator must ensure compliance with code of practice
new arrangements for supporting pupils from minority ethnic groups	basis for judgement by parents, governors and inspectors of quality of provision and its management	specialist teachers and support staff must provide support for pupils within new arrangements
higher proportion of parents and local community representatives on governing bodies	accountability to greater number of lay people on governing bodies	teacher governors represent professional view to greater number of lay people on governing body, all teachers' work contributes to judgements by governors of the quality of heads' management
heads and governors responsible for financial management and staff appointment and dismissal under LMS	governors and inspectors scrutinise LMS budget and its management, governors approve budget	where budgetary management delegated by head, staff concerned are responsible for day to day management, all teachers' work contributes to parents wishing to send their child to the school. The size of the LMS budget depends on the number of pupils
more open enrolment of pupils	parents are more able to choose whether to send their child to the school within a quasi-market	all teachers' work contributes to parents wishing to send their child to the school
ability of schools to become grant maintained, funded directly by central government	where school becomes grant maintained, head is accountable to governors, without LEA support.	all teachers' work contributes to judgements by governors of quality of the head's management
expectation that schools have a development plan	basis for judgement by governors and inspectors of quality of planning and implementation	all teachers' work contributes to quality of planning and implementation
staff development budget and training days	basis for judgement by governors and inspectors of quality of staff development and its management	where budgetary management delegated by head, staff concerned are responsible for day to day management, teachers organise staff development activities
appraisal of teaching staff	basis for judgement by governors and inspectors of quality of scheme and its management	where senior staff are appraisers, their work contributes to quality of scheme

Table 2 – Major management responsibilities of SMT members within each status level (Summer 1996)

Status level	Winton	Pinehill	Kingsrise	Waverley
headteacher	overall responsibility, LMS and in-service training budgets, governors	overall responsibility, LMS and in-service training budgets, governors	overall responsibility, LMS and in-service training budgets, governors	overall responsibility, LMS and in-service training budgets, governors
deputy headteacher	infant department (teacher governor) junior department (teacher governor)	in-service training, appraisal, assessment, special needs, parents, link between head and other staff	in-service training, parents, link between head and other staff, mathematics	assessment, pupil profiling, link between head and other staff, lower junior department, art and display, (teacher governor)
teacher (3 increments)	special needs, upper juniors team leader	early years department, parents as educators middle years department, classroom management older years department community links	assessment, pupil profiling, English English as a second language team leader	
teacher (2 increments)		curriculum management group leader	department 1 department 2 department 3	infant department, junior department, mathematics, design and technology
teacher (1 increment)				English, information technology

Figure 1 - A composite model of headteachers' perception of the SMT role

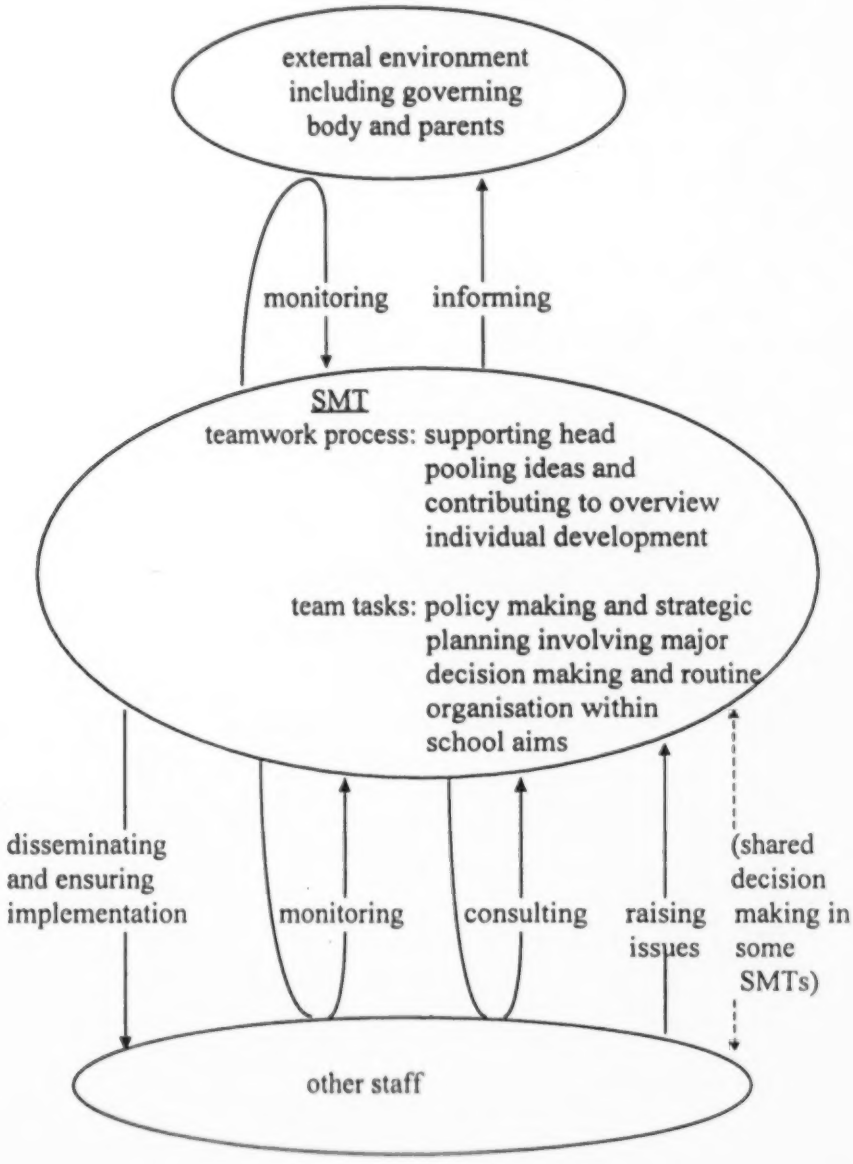


Figure 2 – The shifting balance of contradictory norms within SMTs

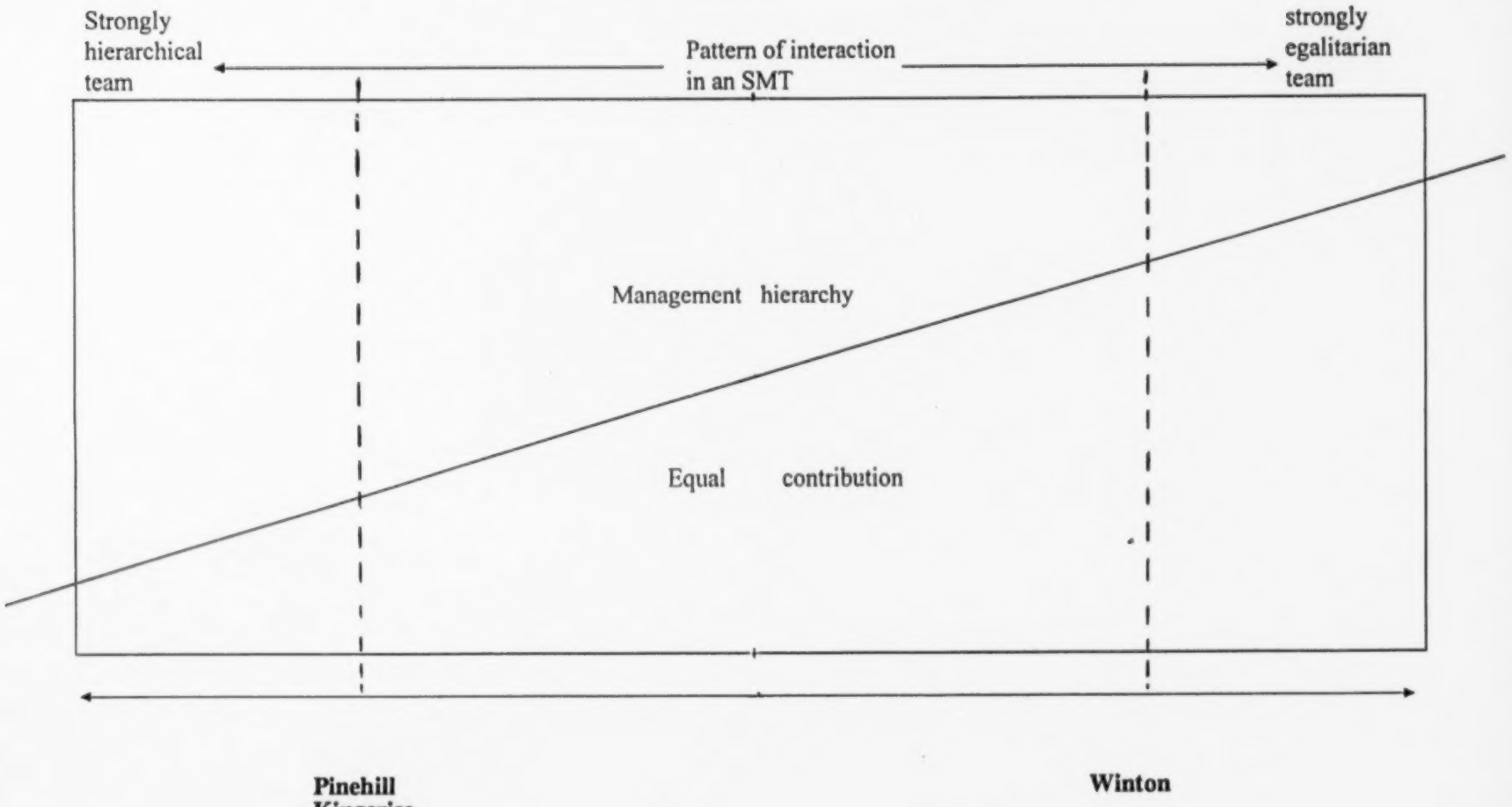
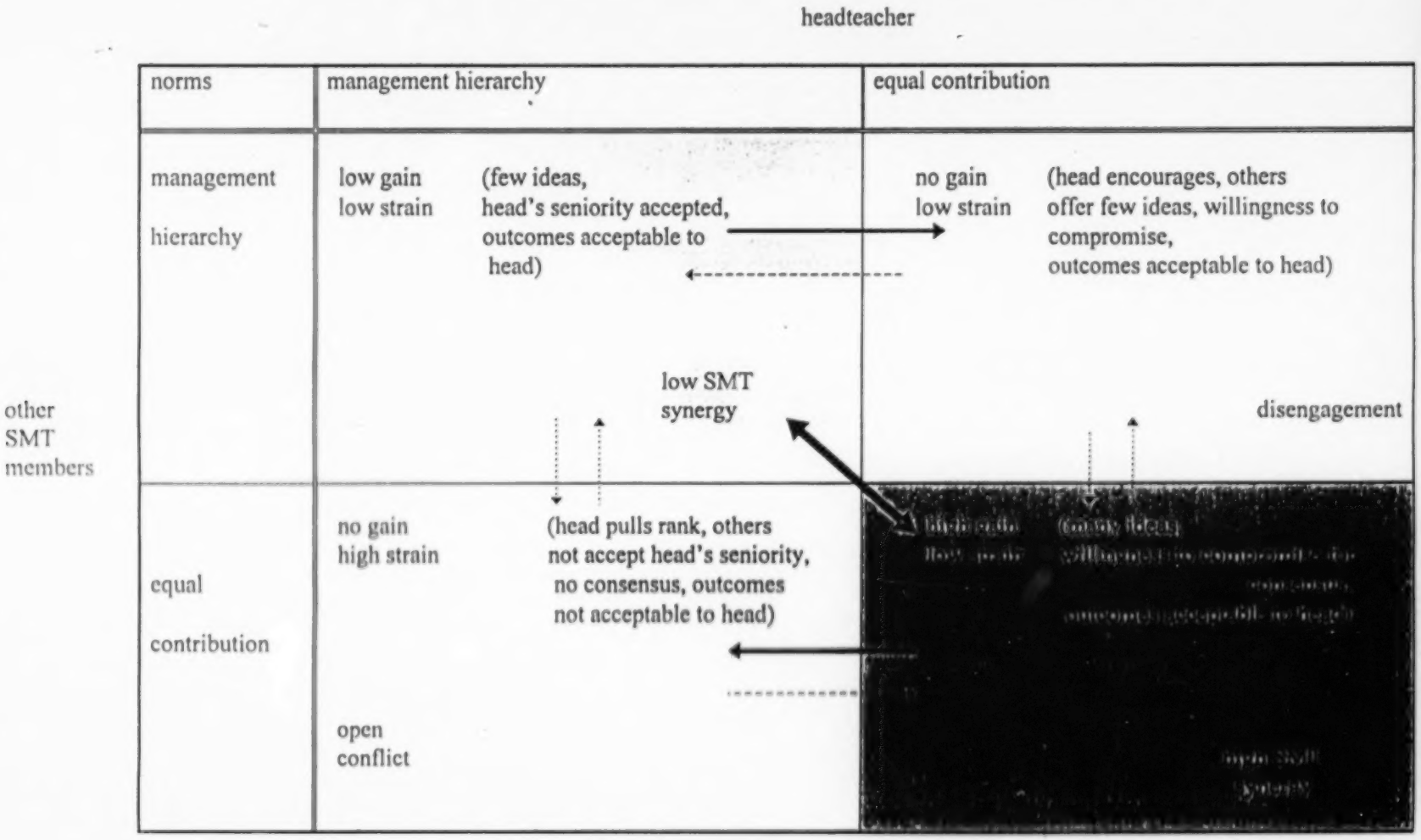


Table 3 – Pattern of SMT meetings

Formal SMT meetings	Winton			Pinehill	Kingsrise		Waverley
frequency	daily	weekly	approximately termly	weekly	monthly	monthly	weekly
timing	before school	Thursday or Friday afternoon inside lesson time	school days and weekends	Friday afternoon inside lesson time	Monday before school	Monday after school	Monday after school
duration	half an hour	one and a half hours	one to three days	two hours	half an hour	one and a half hours	at least one hour
purpose	organisation for the day	organisation for the next week	strategic-planning ~~planning~~	administration and pastoral issues	updating, organisation for the month	planning and routine organisation	planning and routine organisation
approximate time commitment per week		5 hours		2 hours	½	hour	1 hour

Figure 3 – Interaction between headteacher and other SMT members



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